

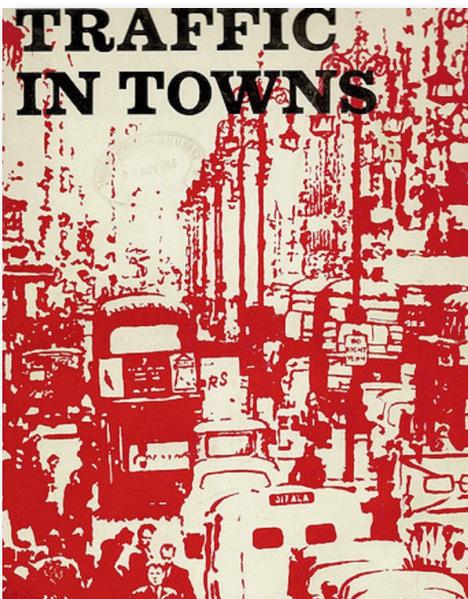
Like a wheel within a wheel...



There is a well-known English proverb that suggests "what goes around comes around". Following the anniversary issue (100 and counting), which showed the repetitive nature of difficulties with the planning system (see my last column), I am reflecting here on the circular nature of roads in London, going back as far as Colin Buchanan's 1963 Traffic in Towns report for the Minister of Transport at the time, one Ernest Marples. This was charged with examining "the rapid growth of motor traffic" - highlighted as one of "the most baffling [problems] which face modern society".

Buchanan was concerned about the fundamental dilemma that car ownership presents: being of great and valuable convenience but a real threat to the people living in towns and cities, both through how to accommodate motor traffic safely without destroying the local environment and, as currently being highlighted today, in terms of pollution.

In common with many larger UK towns, planners produced proposals for road systems that would encircle London, with inner, intermediate and outer ring roads as suggested by Buchanan. But unlike many other urban areas, the outermost of these was eventually completed, as the M25, while the rest were abandoned or only partially implemented. The North and South Circular Roads are the most obvious - today a hotchpotch



of dual carriageways, meandering cross roads, etc, leading in and out of congestion and bottleneck pinch points, the most infamous of which is the Hangar Lane Gyratory - many years in the construction and to this day arguably the slowest section of the North Circular Road in both directions.

But it's the M25 that has always captured the most criticism. From the County of London Plan (1943), which proposed a series of ring roads labelled A to E, to the 1960s Ringway Scheme, which had four circular roads (the innermost having been abandoned), planners have attempted to tackle the rapidly increasing number of private cars and commercial vehicles on London's roads. Apart from the outer road (Ringways 3 and 4, adapted to the final route of the M25), these were never taken further except in small sections, such as the Westway (Ringway 1), due to the enormous costs of upgrading or building new roads to dual carriageway or motorway standards and the impracticalities involved. Parts of London remained blighted until well into the 1980s.

Opposition to the Ringway proposals was immediate and focused on both the social problems (with vast numbers of Londoners potentially living within 200 yards of a motorway) and the prediction that large quantities of additional traffic would be generated purely as a result of the new roads. Ringway planners, the GLC Department of Highways and Transport, admitted that proper studies were not carried out due to limited resources of money and staff. In 1968 the Architectural Review published a detailed critique of The Motorway Box (aka Ringway 1), pointing out that the contemporary London Traffic Survey demonstrated "the volume of traffic trying to use the box will be three or four times greater than its capacity", especially given the number of radial routes that it would be expected to accommodate. This is essentially the criticism that has persisted in respect of the M25 and its reputation as a giant car park when there is a minor accident or other problem - along with the persistent difficulty of finding sensible radial traffic routes into the centre of the capital.

But what is most interesting about

The nature of God is a circle of which the centre is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere - Anon

Buchanan's report is how prescient some of his thinking was. He suggested that there were four possibilities for influencing the burgeoning demand for the optional use of cars in towns. These were (i) a system of permits to control the entry of vehicles [such as larger lorries] to certain zones, (ii) pricing for the use of road space [congestion charge], (iii) stricter parking controls [CPZs as introduced in 19645], and (iv) subsidising public transport so that it offers financial advantages over the use of cars [on-going]. So all of these have, eventually, but over many years and with gradually increasing effectiveness, been implemented in London. The only option missing seems to be the encouragement of cycling!

So what are the lessons that can be learnt for London? Has the planning system helped or hindered efforts to improve traffic flow around the metropolis? Is there (or has there ever been) an effective planning system at all? My feeling is the same as for the influence of planning on developments throughout society, whether for traffic and public transport, housing or commerce. Whatever planning system we have had over the years dealing with these issues is dependent on change and market forces. Timescales are usually so long and the system so slow to keep up that we inevitably lurch from crisis to crisis, whether it is the intolerable pressure on housing supply or the inevitable road reconstructions that result in ever slower traffic speeds in and around the capital.

When, I ask myself, will we ever learn to plan strategically? ■

*Round and round the circle
Completing the charm
So the knot be unknotted
The cross be uncrossed
The crooked be made straight
And the curse be ended.
- T S Eliot The Family Reunion*